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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000173

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN FIJI: ANSWERING
QUESTIONS

REF: A. USDAO SUVA FJ 181938Z APR 06

- [1](#)B. HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI 112254Z APR 06
- [1](#)C. CIA WASHINGTON DC 143447
- [1](#)D. SUVA 133
- [1](#)E. SUVA 167

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Classified By: Amb. Dinger, Sec. 1.4 (B and D)

Introduction

[1](#)1. (C) Ref A provided a partial response to a number of questions raised by HQ PACOM (ref B) and CIA (ref C) concerning issues raised in Suva reporting (ref D and previous) about the state of play in Fiji between Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama and the Qarase government. This cable supplements the response to PACOM's queries and scenarios. Headlines key to Ref B. Embassy comments are necessarily speculative. Some are based on recent conversations with Fiji Police Commissioner Hughes (protect) and Fiji Attorney General Bale. In short, the RFMF has continued to attempt to influence Fiji politics in the lead-up to May elections and has suggested, at times, that it could intervene if the current Qarase government is re-elected and then continues past policies. That rhetoric could be bluff, but at times Bainimarama gives the distinct impression he means what he says.

National security discussions?

[1](#)2. (C) Ref B asked about Fiji national-security discussions and National Security Council (NSC) meetings. Commissioner Hughes informed us that Prime Minister Qarase and Home Affairs Minister Vosanibola, both of who are in caretaker status as they campaign for parliamentary seats in general elections to be held May 6-13, have not been holding regularly scheduled discussions with Hughes. Neither has Hughes been asked to attend any National Security Council (NSC) meetings in recent months. Hughes and Qarase had not met at all within the past month until, during our meeting with Hughes, the PM's office phoned and requested a briefing regarding the Solomon Islands crisis and the deployment of Fiji Police to assist.

What role for the police in a coup?

[1](#)3. (C) Asked per ref B what role the Fiji Police would take if Commodore Bainimarama and elements of the Fiji military (RFMF) were to attempt a coup, Hughes said he has instructed

the police not to attempt to intervene before or during any such event, acknowledging that the Fiji Police are no match for the RFMF in firepower. In the aftermath of a military coup, Hughes suggested, the police could help "sort out" the situation. Both Hughes and RFMF spokesmen have made clear that both police and military stand ready to protect a lawfully elected new government from any civilian-led coup attempt such as happened in 2000.

What course might follow a coup?

14. (C) Turning to ref B questions regarding Commodore Bainimarama's possible course of action if he were to institute a coup, we inquired what Hughes currently thinks is Bainimarama's intent. Hughes indicated he is unable to read the man and suggested, as he has in the past, that Bainimarama suffers from "post-traumatic stress" related to the military mutiny of November 2000 when he was shot at by some of his troops. Hughes noted that sometimes Bainimarama sounds like he is bluffing when he talks coup, but sometimes he seems very serious. We recall that Bainimarama speculated in the past that if he felt compelled to remove the government he would want to turn over powers quickly to an interim civilian government, one which would agree in advance not to run in any elections held later to return Fiji to normalcy. On the other hand, per ref D, Bainimarama told Hughes in late February that he learned from 2000 (when he installed Qarase as interim PM), and if he were to act now he would retain executive power for the long term.

What if the government attempts to remove Bainimarama?

15. (C) Ref B inquired about several possible "combat indicators" for a coup. Ref B's first queried combat indicator: what if the government were to attempt to remove Bainimarama? Qarase told us a few weeks ago that he does not intend to do anything until after the election, but if he

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retains power he "will have to sort it (Bainimarama's insubordination) out." During the current political campaign, Qarase has publicly mentioned taking the RFMF's expansive interpretation of its national-security duties under the Constitution to Fiji's Supreme Court for an opinion. Note: many legal scholars believe Fiji's 1997 Constitution deliberately and dramatically reduced the powers of the RFMF in the political arena as compared to the 1990 Constitution which was enacted by those who engineered Fiji's 1987 coups. The RFMF publicly disputes that interpretation. End note. Vice President Madraiwiwi has indicated privately that he and President Iloilo "may have to consider" invoking executive powers over the military commander under the Constitution if after the elections Bainimarama remains a serious thorn. Pretty clearly though, the President and Vice President would much prefer Bainimarama to exercise self-restraint. Per Ref A, some sources close to the military indicate strongly that any serious attempt to force Bainimarama from his job would bring a "coup" response.

What happens if a new government passes "the Bill"?

16. (C) Ref B's second queried combat indicator: what if there is legislative action to pass controversial ethnic-Fijian-oriented bills on reconciliation, fishing rights, and Fijian courts? Fiji Attorney General Bale told us April 27 that if Qarase's SDL wins the elections, it does intend to reintroduce a reconciliation bill; however, he said, it would be considerably improved, attempting to take into account the many criticisms of last year's bill. The new bill would still set up a commission to consider remedies to help the people of Fiji escape the past, and either a perpetrator or a victim could seek to invoke the commission. But both perpetrator and victim would have to accept the commission's jurisdiction for there to be any remedial action. Asked Embassy Suva's comment, we noted that the Qarase government failed to consult with the Indian community

before pushing the original bill, giving the "victims" from 2000 no real input or sense of ownership. Bale gave no indication that any deliberate effort to consult the Indian community in advance is contemplated this time either. In addition, we recalled past concerns that "amnesty" could contribute to a continuation of Fiji's "coup culture." Certainly, it would be important to study the details of the new bill in that regard. AG Bale indicated that a fishing-rights bill will also be re-introduced in the new Parliament if the SDL wins. When we noted Bainimarama's past fierce opposition to both bills, Bale offered no response. Bainimarama has indicated that those bills are among the Qarase policies which, if pursued again by the new government, could trigger RFMF intervention.

What if coup-criminals achieve high office?

17. (C) Ref B's third queried combat indicator: what if convicted coup participants are appointed to key government ministries? That already took place last fall, when Ratu Naigama, who was convicted of assisting coup participants in Labasa, later was reinstated in the Qarase Cabinet as Transport Minister. The move drew heated criticism from Bainimarama but nothing more. Bainimarama did make clear prior to the Great Council of Chiefs' selection of the President and Vice President in March that inserting a coup convict into either of those senior roles would be unacceptable. The GCC evaded that threat by reappointing the incumbents.

What if new-government cabinet seats become an issue?

18. (C) Ref B's final queried combat indicator: what if Qarase's SDL is re-elected and it refuses to follow the Constitution's requirement to allocate Cabinet seats to all parties that garner 10% or more of seats in Parliament? This was a serious constitutional issue following the 2001 elections when Qarase initially declined to provide Cabinet slots to opposition-leader Chaudhry's FLP and then, when forced by the courts, offered only relatively powerless slots. Even though the Fiji Supreme Court has ruled that the Constitution's requirements must be followed, much grumbling continues, including by Qarase, that the allocation provision is wildly impractical. Bainimarama did not impose his views regarding the issue post-2001, and it has not been visible on his agenda lately.

Does U.S. or Australian pressure help?

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19. (C) Finally, ref B inquired about the effect, if any, that U.S. or Australian pressure has had on Bainimarama. He told Hughes, per ref D, that he doesn't care about international opinion, including the possible loss of aid money from Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. Certainly, Aussie, Kiwi, and American repeated expressions of concern about his coup rhetoric and repeated reminders of the proper, subordinate role for a military in a democracy have not deterred Bainimarama and his military spokesmen from continuing to threaten intervention if they see the need. That said, we know Bainimarama values his military relationships abroad, and he is anxious to host the Pacific Armies Management Seminar (PAMS) in September. He knows full well that a coup would shatter such plans. While PAMS and other such relationships surely factor into Bainimarama's calculations, we think his sense of "what Fiji needs" weighs much heavier. It remains possible that recent RFMF rhetoric is simply bluff, intended to warp the elections against Qarase's SDL. Even bluff, of course, is worrisome if it distorts a "free and fair" election.

And the winner is?

10. (C) We are told that Bainimarama is feeling quite upbeat about the coming election, believing that Chaudhry's

opposition FLP will win, at least in part due to the RFMF's concerted "truth and justice" campaign in Fijian villages. The RFMF describes that campaign as not oriented against any particular party, simply an attempt to educate the ethnic-Fijian populace about the evils of 2000-style ethnic politics; however, much of the rhetoric is clearly anti-Qarase. As noted in ref E, many observers believe Qarase's SDL is still the favorite, though the FLP could pull an upset. Qarase told us his sense is that the RFMF's anti-SDL campaign has actually driven ethnic-Fijian voters toward the SDL rather than away. Time will tell.

DINGER